# Changing the conversation in 5 (not so easy) steps — the reality of pharma sales today

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It's time to look ahead.
This is the year we stop talking about a new normal and how the last few years changed everything and focus on making the changes we know are best for us.

Discussions with multiple customers across the pharma and life sciences ecosystem suggest that powerful changes are coming in the year ahead. Ambitious research will continue to produce more and more breakthroughs in treatments and therapies. Technology has already changed the patient experience and shows no signs of slowing down. And expectations for improved patient outcomes have increased dramatically.

If you are leading a pharma sales force, it's likely the changes and challenges of the last few years are putting the spotlight on your team's performance. And it's possible that you have either been thinking about making changes or have already begun to implement new strategies

Behavioral science tells us that thinking, talking and even initiating strategies is the easy part of the process. What separates the best sales leaders is the ability to keep their message simple, actionable and consistent. Keep in mind that all sales reps, especially top performers, have what's called a status-quo bias. They like to keep heading in the same direction. It's your job to change the conversation – and the behaviors that go along with it.

## 1. Collaborate **creatively.**

With limited opportunities to connect with customers and HCP's during the pandemic, sales and marketing leaders looked internally and stepped up their enablement efforts. The concept of an omni-channel strategic approach to building and maintaining relationships with customers and patients was explored and implemented, almost universally.

The only challenge is that collaboration and coordination of messages is having limited success, even with sophisticated technology and relevant information. That's because things have changed for all organizations beyond just sales and marketing messaging. Employees across the entire organization need to be aligned with patient-centric messaging to ensure launch efforts are successful and sustainment campaigns meet their goals.

## 2. Set **big goals.**

Building on the idea of big-picture communications, another strategy to consider is that of company-wide goal-setting. Organizations of all sizes are emerging from the last two years with fresh ideas and ambitious plans to launch new products, redefine roles and explore new approaches.

But getting everyone on the same page is next to impossible, right? It's not if you break C-level goals into three tactical segments:

- **Knowledge** – Most professional sales organizations are trained thoroughly and are quick to understand the information that's most relevant to them. The key is to reinforce this knowledge frequently and at key touchpoints.
- **Commitment** – Possibly the hardest to achieve – commitment isn't something you simply ask for – it's something that needs to be internal to everyone, for their own reasons.
- **Action** – Follows commitment. A committed individual, team or organization moves faster than the competition, changes direction more nimbly and achieves bigger and better results in the short- as well as the long-term.

## 3. **Devour** data.

Sales organizations are no longer waiting for data, even with the lags often found in pharma and other industries. CRM systems and other tracking should allow you to make a connection between the behaviors and activities that are the most likely to lead to sales success. More and more sales managers and leaders are relying on this type of data to recognize and reward steps to the sale or progress to goal rather than waiting for actual sales results to come in. These might work for longer-term comp plan calculations, but who has time to wait?

**Consider these results from one sample program:**

- When activity was tracked and a focus was put on onboarding, new reps sold DOUBLE that of legacy groups.
- Adding a sales competition (contest) and tracking activity resulted in 157% lift in the first two weeks.
- For every additional recorded activity, total sales increased an average of $5,811 across all reps.

The key to these results is not only to track activities, but also understand, encourage and train reps to focus on the activities that lead to success.

## 4. Communicate **constantly** (and simply).

If you lead a sales force you know that what gets measured, gets done. But what gets communicated, gets attention. Too many sales leaders have what might be deemed an "availability bias." In other words, just because you review multiple data points and reports on a monthly, daily or weekly basis, doesn't mean your individual reps can handle all of that information.

Constant communication is a good thing – it's the lifeblood of any sales organization. But when the messages get disjointed, irrelevant and hard to prioritize, it's difficult for reps to take action. The behaviorists call this the curse of knowledge – if we have too many options, we freeze. Leaders who make it easy to take action are employing the idea of choice architecture.

Question: Want reps to choose a goal?

> Give them 3-5 options and allow them to choose their own goals.

Question: Want reps to focus on a new product?

> Don't give them all information at one time – build to the launch and communicate key messages over the long-term.

Question: Want to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation?

> Simplify your message and only share the most relevant and key points you want them to take away. It's okay to repeat a message. **I repeat:** it's okay to repeat a message.

### 5. **Recognize** the right **behavior(s).**

Once you have identified the key behaviors and communicated expectations in a simple and relevant way, the final step is to recognize (and potentially reward) the right behaviors. In a recent program where CRM activity was tracked and correlated to final results, some of the activities that led to sales success included:

- Building a business case using existing data
- Higher-level meetings (Presentations to or for the C-suite)
- Multiple meetings with key prospects
- Business presentations to key audiences
- Trial or pilot programs

Certainly not breakthrough information – but relevant to the program owner. These 5 activities were contrasted with 17 other activities that produced lower levels of success. How many activities are your teams focused on? If you let them to choose from 22 activities, I'm guessing they will choose the ones they like or the easiest ones.

And when they do choose the right behaviors, simple recognition messages, small thank-you gifts or some discretionary points from an all-employee recognition system can work wonders to encourage repetition. Recognition outside of the comp plan can be a very powerful reward, triggering positive emotions in the brain and stronger connections between the manager and rep.

After reviewing multiple programs, it is clear — simple tactics are most often the most successful. But just because they are simple to pinpoint, they aren't always simple to put into action. If you want your reps to change their conversations with prospects and existing customers, we recommend you change the conversation you are having with reps.

Take a step back and really look at what's happening in your sales organization. And then make it a point to collaborate across the entire organization. Set big goals. Make decisions with data. Communicate, communicate, communicate. And then recognize success.

We can't promise it is the easy way to go.
But the data would say it is the right way to get results.

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Bio:
As Vice President of BI WORLDWIDE's Life Sciences and Healthcare Group, Walter Ruckes' primary focus is to develop engagement strategies and solutions that change the behaviors of employees, salespeople, channel partners and customers. With over 25 years of experience, Walter has developed strategies and programs for teams of all kinds.